



How many states hold a primary or caucus and when are they held?

Historically, only a few states held presidential primaries or caucuses. But the trend has been toward greater voter participation in the presidential nomination process. The number of states holding primaries or caucuses started increasing in the 1970s. Today all 50 states and the District of Columbia have either presidential primaries or caucuses.

States parties choose whether they want to hold a primary or a caucus, and some states have switched from one format to the other over time.

Some states have both primaries and caucuses. For example, in Alaska and Nebraska, Republicans hold primaries while Democrats convene caucuses. In Kentucky, Democrats hold a primary and Republicans a caucus.



- THE STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE HOLDS THE FIRST PRIMARY IN JANUARY OR FEBRUARY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEAR.

- TODAY ALL 50 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA HAVE EITHER PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES OR CAUCUSES.

For many years, Iowa has held the first caucuses, generally in January or early February of the presidential election year, and New Hampshire the first primary, a short time later. Because these and other early contests frequently establish which candidates lack enough support to contend seriously for the presidency, candidates expend great effort in these early states, addressing their needs and interests and organizing campaigns within even smaller states, spending money on staff, media and hotels. As a result, more and more states schedule their primaries and caucuses in the winter months. Many states hold their events on the same day.

The major parties frequently tweak the rules in ways they hope will produce the strongest possible candidate. For example, in 2016, the Republicans will allow states that hold their primaries after March 15 to award their delegates “winner-take-all,” so that the candidate who earns the most votes—even if it’s only, say, 25 percent of the votes in an eight-candidate field—will capture all that state’s delegates.

A major outcome of the proliferation and acceleration of primaries and caucuses is that the nominees of the major parties are known before the national party conventions are held in late summer. This has diminished the importance of the national nominating conventions, which have become largely ceremonial events.